



Carson, A., Irvine, R., & Foster, A. P. (2015). Oak processionary moth (*Thaumetopoea processionea*). *Veterinary Record*, 177(3), 79-80.

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## Oak processionary moth (*Thaumetopoea processionea*)

THE Forestry Commission has brought to our attention reports of horses, in the Chessington area of Kingston upon Thames, with skin irritation suspected to be due to contact with caterpillars of oak processionary moths (OPM) (Fig 1). It is possible that other animals, especially dogs and possibly livestock, may present with skin irritations, and we would like to raise awareness of the hazard of OPM. The Forestry Commission has since removed the caterpillar nests that were thought to be responsible for the horses' irritations.

Labial angio-oedema, ptialism, tongue swelling, stomatitis, conjunctivitis, gagging, vomiting and respiratory distress have been reported following exposure to the caterpillar hairs in dogs and horses (Jans and Franssen 2008, Maronna and others 2008), and dermatitis has been reported in humans (Mindlin and others 2012).

The OPM was first accidentally introduced to Britain in 2005 and is recognised as a non-native species. The caterpillars of OPM are a pest because they can be a hazard to oak trees and to human and animal health. The main OPM outbreak area is largely confined to west/south-west London and Elmbridge/ Spelthorne in Surrey (discovered 2006), where efforts are being made to limit its spread and impact. Further outbreaks have been identified in Pangbourne in west Berkshire (2010) and Bromley and Croydon in south London (2012).

OPM caterpillars are most easily recognised by their distinctive habit of moving about nose-to-tail, often forming arrow-headed processions, with one leader and subsequent rows containing several caterpillars. They almost exclusively live in and feed on oak trees and large populations can strip whole oak trees bare of leaves.

OPM caterpillars have very long, white hairs which contain a protein called thaumetopoein, which can cause mast cell degranulation and subsequent allergic sensitisation. Contact with the hairs can cause itching, skin rashes and, less commonly, sore throats, breathing difficulties and eye problems. This can happen if people or animals touch the caterpillars or their nests, or if the hairs are blown into contact by the wind. The caterpillars can also shed the hairs as a defence mechanism.

The main risk period for OPM caterpillars is April to July and nests should always be avoided. Because of OPM's status as a tree and forestry pest, the Forestry Commission is leading the programme to control the outbreaks to limit their size, population and impacts as much as possible.

Current advice is, DO NOT:

- Touch or approach nests or caterpillars;
- Let children touch or approach nests or caterpillars;
- Let animals touch or approach nests or caterpillars;
- Try removing nests or caterpillars yourself.

Any sightings of the caterpillars or their nests should be reported to the Forestry Commission or local council. More information is available on the Forestry Commission web page [www.forestry.gov.uk/opm#threat](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/opm#threat)

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*Veterinary Record* 2015 177: 79 doi: 10.1136/vr.h3840